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ABSTRACT

The information in this pamphlet is designed to assist parents in helping their children cope with divorce or separation. Parents are urged to build a constructive life for themselves and their children and to continue to make children feel that they are loved. There are four sets of guidelines offered to parents. The first two are designed to assist parents in helping their children adjust to divorce and to make visitation by the noncustodial parent a pleasant experience. The second set of guidelines concern: (1) the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (the Buckley Amendment) which protects the rights of both children and parents regarding the children's school records; and (2) additional ways both parents can become involved with the school regarding their children's education and welfare. Parents are advised to check community sources if they need assistance with parent education or family counseling. (EM)

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...ONCE A PARENT, ALWAYS A PARENT

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DEAR PARENT,

As you know, a divorce or separation decree cannot and does not end your responsibility as a parent. PARENTS ARE FOREVER. Both parents should make every attempt to continue to play a vital part in the lives of their children because children **need** the ongoing interest and concern of their parents. Children must feel they have two parents who love them, even though those parents could not live happily with each other.

It is our hope that the information in this pamphlet will assist you in helping your children cope with your divorce or separation with a minimum of hurt. The practical guidelines which follow are based on the many years of experience of family counselors and educators.

If you are like most people, you probably have some feelings of isolation, despair, depression, loneliness, grief, guilt and a loss of self-confidence. You are worried about many things, such as finances, a new social life, employment, fulfillment of sexual needs, and the welfare of your children. You can use this present time of difficulty as an opportunity for personal growth and a time to become re-acquainted with your children.

The way you feel about yourself will affect the way your children feel about themselves. **The way you cope with your divorce will in large part determine how your children cope with it.**

Yes, you are at a cross-roads and can choose from alternative routes. While one road leaves you living in the past, feeling constant bitterness, and turning the children against your former marriage partner, this is a dead-end road which spells trouble for you and your children. The other road, and the constructive one, leads to becoming involved with experiences that provide opportunities for you to again feel success; to get to know yourself better; to restore your self-confidence; and to reach out for goals that will make your life productive, satisfying, and meaningful.

The task of all parents, whether or not a marriage continues, is not easy. All parents make mistakes. But if you have a good relationship with your children and they feel your love and acceptance, they can also use the upheaval of divorce to stimulate new growth and understanding in their lives.

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Guidelines for Parents

As we have already indicated, the way you cope with your divorce will in large part determine how your children cope with it. You can use the experience of divorce as an opportunity for personal growth—not defeat. In this way you can continue to be effective as a parent and to not only effectively meet your children's needs, but just as important, your own needs as a person. Continuing conflict between the two parents during and after divorce can interfere with your effectiveness as parents.

1. **Allow yourself and your children time for readjustment.** Recovery time from an emotional operation such as divorce or separation is essential. Be patient with yourself and your children during this time.
2. **After the healing begins, try to remember the best parts of your marriage.** Share them with your children and use them constructively whether or not you have custody.
3. **Assure your children that they are not to blame for the breakup and that they are not being rejected or abandoned.** Children, especially the young ones, often feel they have done something wrong and believe the problems in the family are the result of their misdeeds. Small children may feel that some action or secret wish of theirs has caused the trouble between their parents.
4. Continuing anger or bitterness toward your former partner can injure your children far more than the divorce or separation itself. **The feelings you show are more important than the words you use.**
5. **Try to avoid criticizing the other parent.** It is difficult but necessary for a child's healthy development. It is important that the child respect both parents. Talking out your frustrations with someone other than your child can help.
6. **Do not force or encourage your children to take sides.** To do so encourages frustration, guilt, and resentment in the child.
7. **Try not to upset a child's routine in too many ways at one time.** Children need a sense of continuity and it is disturbing to them if they must cope with too many changes at once.

8. **Divorce or separation often leads to financial pressures on both parents**. When there is a financial crisis, the parents' first impulse may be to try to keep the children from realizing it. Often, they would rather make sacrifices themselves than ask the child to do so. The atmosphere is healthier when there is frankness and when children are expected to help.

9. **Marriage breakdown is always hard on the children**. They may not always show their distress or realize at first what this will mean to them. Parents should be direct and simple in telling children what is happening and why, and in a way a child can understand and digest. This will vary with the circumstances and each child's age and comprehension. The worst course is to try and hush things up and make children feel they must not talk or even think about what they sense is going on. Unpleasant happenings need explanation which should be brief, prompt, direct, and honest.

10. **The story of your divorce or separation may have to be retold after the children get older and consider life more maturely**. Though it would be unfortunate to present either situation as a tragedy and either parent as a martyr, it would be a pity also to pretend there are no regrets and that the breakdown of a marriage is so common it hardly matters.

11. **The guilt parents may feel about the marriage breakdown may interfere in their disciplining the children**. A child needs consistent control and direction. Overly permissive or indecisive parents who leave a child at the mercy of every passing whim and impulse interfere with a child's healthy development. Children need and want to know quite clearly what is expected of them. Children feel more secure when limits are set. They are confused when grown-ups seem to permit behavior which they themselves know to be wrong and are trying to outgrow. Children need leadership and sometimes authority. Parents must be ready to say "NO" when necessary.

Visitation Guidelines

The behavior of parents has a great influence on the emotional adjustment of their children. This is equally true after the breakdown of a marriage. The following visitation guidelines have been found to be helpful in achieving meaningful visits:

1. **It is important to try to maintain contact between the child and the parent who has left home**. Maintaining some form of contact helps the child deal with fantasies which are much worse than the reality of what is happening, helps to decrease feelings of rejection, decreases feelings that the divorce happened because (s)he is a bad child, and reduces fears of never seeing the other parent again.

2. **Visits can be pleasant not only for the children but for both parents**. Visitation can help your children maintain a positive relationship with their visiting parent. It is important that neither parent verbally or physically attack the other parent in the presence of the children. Children tend to view such attacks as attacks on them. Discuss difficult issues in private from the children.

3. **The parent with whom the children live must prepare them physically and emotionally for the visit**. The children should be available promptly at the time mutually agreed upon and returned at the time agreed upon.

4. **The visits should not take place only in the children's home**. The visiting parent may wish the children to visit in his or her home overnight, or may want to plan an enjoyable outing.

5. The question is often asked, "Should the father take the children to the girlfriend's house?" The same question is asked about the mother if she is the non-custodial parent. Visitation is the time for the children and parent to be with each other, to enjoy each other and to maintain positive relationships. **Having other people participate may interfere with the parent-child experience during visitation**. However, it should not be ruled out altogether.

6. **Visits should be as frequent as practical**. Any schedules established should be flexible. Should scheduled visits need to be cancelled (and sometimes they have to be), inform the other parent as soon as possible with a full and honest explanation to the child.

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7. You may need to adjust the visitation schedule from time to time according to your children's age, health, and interests.

8. Frequently non-custodial parents ask why they should visit. They are hurt; feel they are no longer needed; the custodial parent has the home and the children. **The visit is one of the few times that the non-custodial parent has personal contact with the children and it can be a very essential contact for a healthy relationship between the parent and child.** Even though the parents have not been able to get along, the children still need both parents.

9. Often, the non-custodial parent questions where they should take the children on the visits and what they should plan in the way of amusement for them, particularly if the children are young. Activities may add to the pleasure of the visit, but most important of all is the non-custodial parent's involvement with the children. **A giving of self is more important than whatever material things they may get.**

10. The visit should not be used to check on the other parent. Children should not be pumped for this kind of information. They should not be used as little spies. Often in the children's perception, the parents hate each other and the children will feel uncomfortable at the time of the visits. In the children's minds, if they do anything to please the visiting parent, they may invite outright rejection by their other parent. They may feel they have already lost one parent and are fearful of losing the other. For these reasons, parents can help by showing mutual respect for each other.

11. The children may be left with disturbing problems following visits and both parents can make every effort to discuss them and to agree on ways to deal with them.

12. Both parents should strive for agreement in decisions pertaining to the children, especially discipline, so that one parent is not undermining the other parent's efforts.

These guidelines may not always be possible to follow. They are intended as suggested ways for you the parent to help your child with the difficult and confusing reorganization of the family structure.

School Guidelines

The total well-being of the child is the primary concern of the school, as well as of the parents. Your behavior as a parent affects the child's adjustment in the school environment. Positive parental involvement with the school system can be a very supportive experience for the child.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (the Buckley Amendment) does protect the rights of both parents to have access to the school records of their child, regardless of who has custody. School districts must establish policies which:

1. Allow all parents access to see each educational record of the child kept in the school files and to receive an explanation of the records,
2. Describe procedures for parents to see records,
3. Annually inform parents that they have the right of access and tell them where they can read the entire policy (typically this information is with registration materials),
4. Require written permission of a parent before releasing any identifiable information about the child to a third party other than certain school personnel, and
5. Inform parents that they have the right to follow written school policies for seeking correction in the records that he or she believes to be inaccurate or misleading.

In divorce cases of sole custody, both parents have all the rights of the Act unless a state law or court order provides to the contrary. However, a non-custodial parent cannot violate a specified visitation court order by actually visiting with the child on school grounds or by physically removing the child from school grounds. In joint custody judgments, both parents will always have equal rights and privileges regarding the child's educational process.

Beyond the rights granted to parents under federal law, state law and individual school district policies will establish guidelines for other ways that both parents can be involved in the school-related aspects of the child's life. These guidelines may include the opportunity for either parent to:

1. Silently observe in the classroom or playground, after registering with the school office;

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2. Attend parent-invited school functions;
3. Schedule teacher conferences to review the child's progress;
4. Request administrative conferences to explain materials in the school record (provided for by the Buckley Amendment).

All parents are asked to abide by individual school policies which are designed to promote the health and well-being of the child. Check with your child's school office to learn what local guidelines have been established.

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The task of parenting is never easy; the challenge of parenting after divorce is greatly multiplied. Society is just beginning to recognize the tremendous importance of success and provide a variety of supports for those facing the challenge of parenting after divorce. Your community may offer parenting education or family counseling resources through public agencies, schools, churches, or private practitioners. Check with a local human services directory for further resources.

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